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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT PARTIES SUFFER MIDTERM REBUFF IN BY ELECTIONS TO FILL MCCREEVY AND BRUTON SEATS

1.Summary. The results of the Kildare North and Meath by-elections held on March 11 saw the Government parties suffering a more comprehensive mid-term rebuke than anticipated, winning neither seat and getting fewer votes in these districts than in 2002. While no government party has won a by-election since 1982, PM Ahern's Fianna Fail party had shown gains nationally in a February poll and expected a better result in these elections. Analysts are citing as causes voter dissatisfaction with the state of roads, schools and hospitals, and uninspired campaigning by local members of Fianna Fail, who are said to remain angry that PM Ahern had 'forced' Charlie McCreevy to vacate his seat to become Ireland's EU commissioner. Opposition parties Fine Gael and Labour are likely to see the results as a sign that the government could be vulnerable in 2007 national elections. Sinn Fein took more than 12 per cent of the vote in Meath, despite the pressure the party has been under recently in connection with IRA criminality and the murder of Robert McCartney. End summary.

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Filling John Bruton's and Charlie McCreevy's Shoes  
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12. The seat in the Meath constituency was vacated by John Bruton (Fine Gael), following his appointment as EU Ambassador to the United States. In Kildare North, candidates vied for the seat formerly held by Charlie McCreevy (Fianna Fail) who is now European Commissioner for the Internal Market. In an extremely low turnout (38.2 per cent in Kildare North, 40.6 per cent in Meath), the government parties won fewer votes than in the 2002 general election. Shane McEntee won the seat previously held by his Fine Gael party colleague John Bruton. Independent candidate, Catherine Murphy, took the Kildare North seat vacated by Charlie McCreevy. Major issues in the by-elections included transport problems and commuting (both constituencies are populated by large numbers of commuters who work in Dublin), childcare and the health service. Seven candidates ran in each constituency.

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Government Parties Punished for Poor Infrastructure  
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13. Traditionally, by-elections have little in common with general elections and are used to punish the government of the day for perceived inadequacies and failures. Although no Government party has won a by-election since 1982, Fianna Fail, in particular, was disappointed with the unexpected double by-election defeat. In Meath the party's vote dropped from 44.9 per cent in 2002 to 32.4 per cent. Similarly in Kildare North, first preference votes fell from 43.2 per cent to 24.5 per cent. In a radio interview, Prime Minister Bertie Ahern attributed the drop in Kildare partly to uninspired campaigning by the local party machinery (which reportedly had opposed Ahern's move to transfer McCreevy to Brussels). The Progressive Democrats, the junior government party, saw their vote drop by a third in Meath, from 11.9 per cent to 7.9 per cent, and secured only 5.4 per cent of the vote in Kildare North.

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Opposition Sets its Sights on 2007 General Election  
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14. The outcome for those parties offering to form an alternative government was encouraging. The voting pact arrangement between Fine Gael and the Labour Party, where supporters of each party are encouraged to give their second preference to the other party, worked well, and Fine Gael will be delighted by the poll-topping performance of Shane McEntee in Meath. The party also performed solidly in Kildare North and was the only party to increase its percentage of the vote in both constituencies. Labour saw a slight drop in support in Kildare North where Independent candidate and former Labour Party councillor, Catherine Murphy, took the seat. Labour's vote in Meath rose from 4.3 per cent in 2002 to 11.2 per cent, giving the party a strong base to work from for the next general election.

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Sinn Fein Holds Its Own  
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15. Sinn Fin's Joe Reilly took 12.2 per cent of the vote in Meath (up from 9.4 per cent in 2002), despite the pressure the party has been under recently in connection with IRA criminality and the murder of Robert McCartney. Notwithstanding the low turnout, Councillor Reilly attracted 6,087 first preference votes, compared to 6,042 votes in 2002 when the turnout was almost 60 per cent. The vote indicates that Sinn Fein will remain a political force despite its perceived association with criminal activity. In the next general election, however, the current five-seat Meath constituency will be divided into two three-seaters, Meath east and Meath west. This geographical shake up will probably work against Sinn Fein's electoral prospects. Sinn Fein's Chief Negotiator, Martin McGuinness had described the Meath by-election as 'probably the most critical election we have fought in 20 years' and described the party's vote as 'an incredible performance' and would be used as a 'springboard' for the UK elections in May. Sinn Fein did not have a candidate in the Kildare North constituency.

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Comment  
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16. The outcome in the two constituencies has dented the conventional political wisdom that the current Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrats government is coasting toward a third general election victory in a row. Despite their good showing, however, the main opposition parties have considerable ground to make up before they can offer a convincing alternative to put before the electorate in two years' time.

KENNY